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REMARKS

ON SOME PASSAGES IN

SIR GILBERT BLANE'S

ELEMENTS OF MEDICAL LOGIC.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"OBSERVATIONS ON THE UTILITY AND ADMINISTRATION
OF PURGATIVE MEDICINES."

MDCCCXXI.

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TO

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PROFESSOR OF CLINICAL SURGERY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF
EDINBURGH.

MY DEAR SIR,

YOU are aware, I believe, that when I published my *Observations on Purgative Medicines*, I resolved to abstain from any controversy to which they might give rise. Lately, however, your worthy friend, Sir Gilbert Blane, has, with candour and politeness, in his *Elements of Medical Logic*, remarked on two or three of the topics which I advocate. Sir Gilbert's reputation and rank in the medical profession, must give weight, and justly so, to his opinions; and lest, from this circumstance, you should receive an unfavourable impression of a work, which you have patronized in its progress through six editions, I take the liberty of

submitting to you what I think may be urged in my defence, and I trust your goodness will find an apology for this intrusion. Wishing to state the same to such of my friends as may peruse Sir Gilbert's work, and to avoid the trouble of transcription, I have caused a few copies to be printed for this purpose.

I am, my dear Sir,

Yours, faithfully,

JAMES HAMILTON.

EDINBURGH, 1st Nov. 1821.

REMARKS, &c.

SIR GILBERT BLANE, in his *Elements of Medical Logic*, controverts the practice which I establish, in my *Observations on Purgative Medicines*, respecting the exhibition of purgatives in the cure of TYPHOUS FEVER, SCARLATINA, and CHOREA SANCTI VITI; and supports the doctrine, to which I am opposed, respecting the SPECIFIC ACTION OF PURGATIVES. The remarks I have to offer, explanatory of my practice, follow the enumeration of the subjects of SIR GILBERT'S animadversions. I prefix letter E to quotations from the second edition of *Elements of Medical Logic*, and letter O to quotations from the sixth edition of *Observations on Purgative Medicines*.

I. and II. TYPHOUS FEVER AND SCARLATINA.

SIR GILBERT says, E. p. 187.

“ In a work of Dr. Hamilton’s, on the *Utility of Purgative Medicines*, these remedies are recommended not only in typhous fever, but in scarlet fever; and he does not qualify this advice by stating that any cases are to be excepted. I have certainly seen cases of both these sorts of fever without any perceptible deviation from the healthy state in the secretions of the abdomen, and in which purging would seem not to be called for, particularly in the scarlet fever, in which the employment of purgatives, as a general practice, is considered by the best practitioners in this quarter as highly pernicious; and there are few symptoms so certainly fatal in this disease as a spontaneous diarrhœa.”

Apprehending that preconceived opinions and inveterate practice would be opposed to my views

in the exhibition of purgative medicines, I was particularly anxious to inculcate, that in the diseases of which I treated, I employed purgative medicines to procure a laxative effect only, carefully guarding against full purging. Although this precaution was frequently repeated in the course of my work, yet I felt the necessity of prefixing a preface to the fourth edition, in which I concentrated my advice in this matter, and reprinted the same preface, in the fifth and sixth editions. In it I say expressly, O. p. xxii.

“ Thus I institute a course of purgative medicines, to effect the salutary purpose of restoring and supporting regularity in the alvine evacuation. A course of purging would defeat this end ; in fact it would quickly exhaust and destroy the patient.”

“ The principle, then, on which I proceed, is to obviate constipation, and at the same time to avoid purging. Many passages in my book bear directly on this point ; Pp. 40. 55. 57. 62. 84. The general scope of my observations attests its importance ; and the detail of cases in the appendix shews with what scrupulous uniformity I adhere to it.”

On the subject of TYPHUS, I observe, O. p. 37.

“ This practice, by means of purgative medicines, does not supersede other remedies employed to fulfil other indications, particularly the free access to pure and fresh air. I am even ready to allow, that although I exclude emetics and glysters from my general practice in typhous fever, yet particular circumstances may arise to make both the one and the other necessary. I cannot however avoid remarking, that for many years past, I have found these other remedies, and wine in particular, to be less necessary than I formerly thought. This may be owing in part to typhous fever being less malignant than it was some time ago, and in part to the purgative medicines, which I employed with freedom, removing and obviating symptoms of debility. If this be a just view of the case, the plain inference is, that while purgative medicines preserve a regular state of the body, they do not aggravate the debilitating effects of fever. This doctrine is at variance with that which is commonly entertained, but I am confi-

dent it is consonant to the fact. The complete and regular evacuation of the bowels, in the course of fever, is the object to be attained. Within this limit I have had much satisfaction in prosecuting the practice, nor have I had, in a single instance, occasion to regret any injury proceeding from it, for I am not an advocate for exciting unusual secretion into the cavity of the intestines, and for procuring copious watery stools; these, while they are not necessary, might increase the debility so much dreaded."

On the subject of SCARLATINA, I say, O. p. 55.

"I have observed the pungent heat of surface, violent headach, turgescence of features, flushing of countenance, and full and quick pulse, the earliest symptoms in some epidemics of scarlatina, and which may have suggested and warranted the practice of blood-letting, to be quickly subdued by one or two brisk purgatives. Full purging is not required in the subsequent periods of

the disease, in which the sole object is to remedy the impaired action of the intestines; to secure the complete and regular expulsion of their contents, and thus to prevent the accumulation of feces, which never fails to aggravate the symptoms and to prove the source of farther suffering to the patient."

On the particular symptom of DIARRHOEA, when speaking of CYNANCHE MALIGNA, I say, O. p. 63.

"An exhausting diarrhœa, or even a dysentery, it is said, are troublesome and common consequences of cynanche maligna, on which account purgatives are said to be injurious. But I cannot see the force of this objection. For, were I to devise a mean of preventing these consequences, or of removing them when they had taken place, none more likely would occur to me than the use of those very purgatives, which are thus so dogmatically proscribed. While I employed them, however, I would carefully limit their effect to the express purpose of

unloading the bowels, and shun the inconvenience of inducing weakness by full purging.”

And I support this opinion by referring to the sentiments of the late Doctor Rodbard of Ipswich, O. p. 65. and to the account of scarlatina, as it prevailed among the children at Ackworth School, drawn up by Dr. Binns, in which the Doctor thus speaks. O. p. 72.

“ My acknowledgments are due to Thomas Oxley of Pontefract, not only for his frequent attendance, but for his removal of a prejudice against laxatives in the early stage of the disease, imbibed from various authors, and confirmed by the dreadful consequences I had seen when a diarrhœa came on in this fever. By his persuasion, small doses of calomel and other laxatives were occasionally administered; and so far from producing injury, I believe, that by evacuating the acrid matter which is often swallowed, they had a tendency to prevent the excoriations of the intestinal canal, and

the consequent diarrhœa which I dreaded. But it should be remarked, that particular care was taken to support the patient during the operation."

Guided by this restricted use of purgative medicines, I am free to say that no case of typhus or scarlatina has occurred to me, that would suggest an exception to a practice, which with me has been uniformly beneficial. If purging, as implied in Sir Gilbert's observation, were adopted, I apprehend the speedy relinquishment of it would render any qualification unnecessary.

III. CHOREA SANCTI VITI.

SIR GILBERT says, p. 188, E.

"One of the diseases, in which he," (Dr. Hamilton,) "recommends, unqualifiedly, the employment of this treatment," (by purgatives,) "is the Chorea Sancti Viti. The qualified adoption of this practice, I am so far from disputing, that I lately imitated

it with success in the case of a young female from the East Indies, in which the vitiated quality, incredible quantity, and long continuance of alvine sordes was such as to bid defiance to all the principles of physiology and pathology to account for. But in a young English female under my care at the same time, for the same complaint, nothing preternatural being observed in the alvine discharges after the first clearance of the intestines, she was successfully treated by the cold-bath and metallic tonics, chiefly the sulphate and oxyde of zinc, and the recovery was effected in a shorter time than in the former case. I found, in St. Thomas's Hospital, the like success attended the latter treatment of this disease. Opium, hyoscyamus, and leeches to the temples, were found good auxiliaries."

When discussing a few general Observations on Purgative Medicines, I say, O. p. 20.

"In like manner different applications to the surface move the belly. Among these, that

of cold is conspicuous, although this effect, however much it deserves to be noticed, and however much it may serve to regulate the practice of cold-bathing, both in health and in disease, appears to have been in a great measure, if not altogether overlooked by late writers on the interesting and popular subject of the cold affusion."

In this view, the cure of the young English female appears to have commenced with the first clearance of the intestines, and to have been completed by the influence of the cold-bath, supporting and promoting the alvine evacuation ; an effect which, not being expected, may have been overlooked by Sir Gilbert.

The more speedy recovery of the English female, compared with that of the female from the East Indies, affords no certain conclusion in favour of the metallic tonics. Chorea, under the same treatment will, in different instances, be more or less protracted. I have endeavoured to account for this, but without success.

“ Other circumstances,” I remark, O. p. 153.
 “ besides those mentioned, must be taken into consideration when we attempt a prognosis,” as to the duration of chorea ; “ but what these are I have not learned.”

It is now nearly thirty years since I commenced the exclusive employment of purgative medicines in chorea. During this long period many instances of the disease have occurred to me, and of those, some of the most forbidding nature, by reason of the long duration of the ailment, or of the violence and pertinacity of the irregular motions. In all of them, without an exception, I made perfect and permanent cures. I cannot, therefore, see how I am to qualify a practice so eminently successful.

My subject necessarily confined me to the illustration of the utility of purgative medicines in several diseases, and prevented me from descending on their general treatment. Had I, however, departed in the present instance, from this line of conduct, I believe I should hardly have proposed the sulphate and oxyde of zinc, as direct remedies for chorea, or opium and hyoscy-

mus, as auxiliaries to purgative medicines ; before adopting which, I had experienced the inertness and uncertainty of the former, and occasionally the injurious effects of the latter.

IV. SPECIFIC ACTION OF PURGATIVE MEDICINES.

I say, O. p. 22.

“ The favourers of the humoral pathology called in the aid of purgative medicines to expel peccant matter, supposed to have been previously separated from the mass of blood by an appropriate fermentation. They also taught that different purgatives possessed distinct powers, and moved different fluids by a specific action. Hence they talked of cholagogues, phlegmagogues, hydragogues, melanagogues ; and they displayed no little sagacity in the selection of the purgative adapted to the expulsion of the fluid supposed to be prevalent at the time. This fermentation, however, and consequent deposition of peccant humours, have ceased to hold a place in the doctrines

of physic ; while the specific operation of purgatives in expelling particular fluids, is neither confirmed by subsequent experience, nor allowed to have much influence in practice.”

SIR GILBERT says, E. p. 189.

“ There is another point, on which I feel myself bound to declare my dissent from this respectable practitioner. He (Dr. Hamilton) denies that different species of purgative medicines possess distinct powers over the different species of matter to be evacuated, and contemns the notion of cholagogues, hydragogues, &c.

But in a previous part of his work, SIR GILBERT holds a different language. He says, E. p. 140.

“ Hippocrates too, though one of the most chaste and accurate observers of nature, and collector of facts, was by no means exempt from that spirit of system, originat-

ing in the innate propensity of mankind to assign causes, however lightly and hastily, manifesting itself in hypothetical and gratuitous assumptions of general principles. And there cannot be a more flagrant exemplification of this, than in this great man referring all diseases to excess, defect, or vitiation of the four humours, blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile. Equally absurd and gratuitous, equally disavowed by nature and observation, is the theory of Galen, grounded on the cardinal qualities of heat and cold, moisture and dryness."

In thus discrediting the humoral pathology of Hippocrates, SIR GILBERT must reject much of the specific action of purgatives ; for where no cause of disease exists, remedies are not wanted.

SIR GILBERT proceeds to establish his opinion, and says, E. p. 190.

" In the course of my experience, there is no practical fact, with the truth of which I

have been more satisfied, than the specific action of the various species of those remedies, in stimulating different organs, in dislodging and eliminating different species of corrupted secretions and other feculent matter. What, for instance, can be more different than the operation of aloes acting as a mere eccoprotic on the muscular fibres of the intestines, and only on a particular portion of them, namely, the descending colon and rectum, and expelling only solid feces, from that of elaterium, of which half a grain, taken three or four times, at the interval of half an hour, evacuates immense quantities of serous fluid, exhibiting an example of the wonderful power of sympathy; for an impression made on the internal surface of the stomach, by a few particles of matter, conveys by magic, as it were, an impulse to the most remote extremities, rousing their absorbents to action, and in case of *œdema* there, awakening the sleeping energies of these vessels, which, like millions of pumps at work, transmit the morbid fluid to the intestines and urinary

passages, effecting a detumescence of the hydropic limbs in the course of a few hours, and affording a striking illustration of the sympathetic action of medicines, and an instructive example of those of the sorbifacient class.”

I trust it will be unnecessary for me to follow the reasoning contained in this last and long sentence. I may briefly say, that aloes is not an eccoprotic purgative only ; in large and full doses it acts on the intestines generally, and produces fluid evacuations more or less copious ; and that by the illustration which Sir Gilbert gives of elaterium, its diuretic effects are obvious. The difference, therefore, in the operation of this medicine, and in that of aloes, which is attempted to be established, affords no certain conclusion touching the specific action of purgatives.

SIR GILBERT proceeds, E. p. 191.

“ Again, what can be more different than the operation of neutral salts and calomel, the former exerting but little influence beyond

the surface of the intestines, exciting the action only of the serous exhalants, mucous glands and follicles ; while the other, by extending its stimulus to the biliary ducts and pores, detaches foul congestions which the other could not reach.”

I am disposed to be of opinion, that calomel, in full doses, differs but little in its effect, if at all, from that of neutral salts. In small doses, however, and when its purgative effect is prevented, calomel will enter into the system, and by its mercurial action, remedy organic and functional derangement of the liver, and may stimulate the biliary ducts and pores, and detach foul congestions, if any are present. Calomel, however, thus acting, is, in the language of the schools, an alterative or deobstruent, not a purgative.

It may not be unreasonable, perhaps, to express some surprise, that the doctrine of the specific action of purgative medicines is still a hypothetical or conjectural one. Upwards of 2000 years have elapsed since the promulgation of the humoral pathology of Hippocrates ; and

it is even at this time a desideratum in medicine, to say, what organ or gland is affected by any particular purgative ; or to show, in the alvine *egesta*, the predominant corrupted secretions, and other feculent matter, selected, dislodged, and eliminated by a particular and appropriate stimulus.

After all, I do not feel much interested in the decision of this question : and wishing to abstain from all theoretical disquisitions, I conclude my general observations on purgative medicines with the following remark. O. p. 27.

“ Besides unloading the bowels, purgative medicines are said to stimulate the ducts of different glands connected with the stomach and intestines, and to promote their respective secretions ; and to this effect much of the utility of purgative medicines is attributed. I think it unnecessary to inquire whether this opinion be well or ill founded ; for, without derogating from the good effects of purgatives acting in this way, I will only observe, that in the diseases of which I treat, I refer the benefit arising

from them, to their sensible effect in unloading the bowels, rather than to one which is less obvious ; and that, for the sake of perspicuity, I speak of this effect as removing a cause of irritation, without however meaning to advance or support any theory on the subject.”

FINIS.

